

WE ARE K9

A LITTER PREPARES FOR MILITARY WORKING DOG TRAINING

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON
PHOTOS BY TECH. SGT. BENNIE J. DAVIS III

This Belgian Malinois puppy isn't content to be a household pet. She wants to work. You can take her for a long walk, but don't put away the leash. She's ready to go again. She creates problems to solve by putting her toy in a corner, but don't try to get it for her. This dog wants to solve the problem herself. Rrespect, the military working puppy in training, even drinks water with the toy in her bowl, not taking her eye off it for more than a few seconds. The toy is her prey.

Rrespect was one of eight puppies born June 2 at the Department of Defense Military Working Dog Breeding Program at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Names of puppies like Rrespect and her siblings in the "R" litter begin with repeated letters to indicate they were bred through the program at Lackland.

"I like to think of her like a smart child," said Sarah Dietrich, Rrespect's foster parent. "A smart child's not

going to be happy to sit at the computer all day. These dogs are the smart children, and they want to explore every corner of everything. You can see her future in her."

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— Sarah Dietrich

Lackland is known as the dog mecca for all service branches, said Tracy Shaw, the breeding program contract manager when the "R" litter was born. DOD's breeding colony's ultimate goal is to provide one-third of all dogs procured for military working dog training and is tasked to produce at least 100 puppies each fiscal year. Each litter can range from two to 15 puppies. Eight of the 12 puppies in Rrespect's litter survived a cesarean-section birth.

One of the foster parents' most important responsibilities is helping their dogs become accustomed to the sights and sounds they're likely to experience as military working dogs. Rrespect became accustomed to the sounds of other animals, people talking and other sounds as she accompanied Mrs. Dietrich to work every day at a local pet store.

Two weeks before the puppies' birth, 341st Training Squadron dog trainer Bernie Green had to euthanize her retired Maryland State Police dog, Rruuk, because of cancer. She fostered one of the "R" litter puppies, and he was named after Rruuk. He accompanied Ms. Green daily on the training trailer with the adult dogs, so he visited detection training labs, aircraft and vehicle training lots and office buildings, and walked up and down stairways before he began his own training.

Staff Sgt. Samuel Durbin often took Rrigatoni to his job at the security forces armory at Lackland.



Rruuk, at 3 months
old. Rruuk is
pre-training to be a
military working dog
with the Department
of Defense Military
Working Dog
Breeding Program at
Lackland Air Force
Base, Texas.





Rrisky, a Belgian Malinois puppy, greets visitors at the breeding program kennels.

(opposite, top to bottom) Rrespect follows a trail of kibble into a darkened box as part of a test that Lynnette Butler, a foster consultant, evaluates from a distance. This test determines how willing the puppy is to follow the scent into the dark interior of the box and eat the food inside. Rrespect earned top dog status, with high scores in nearly all of her tests.

Rrespect's paw prints mark the floor of her kennel after she was caught playing in her water bowl.

"When she is at work with me, we walk or ride everywhere, and she goes into any building on base," Sergeant Durbin said. "She has a following at most places we go and demands a crowd everywhere. I'm very thorough on taking her into every kind of environment. She will go into any building, jump on anything she can reach, and has very few fears. If I go somewhere, she doesn't want to be left behind."

From Rrespect's and the other puppies' third through 16th day of life, breeding program puppy development specialists evaluated their reflexes and responses with early neurological stimulation exercises. The Army developed biosensor exercises to improve its dog performances in what became known as the "Super Dog Program." Biosensor exercises affect the neurological system by kicking it into action earlier than would normally be expected and is believed to cause improved cardiovascular performance, stronger heartbeats and a greater resistance to disease and stress.

"We're looking to find out what stresses the puppies and evaluate their responses," Ms. Shaw said. "You

introduce the stress, and the body recognizes it as conditioning."

The handlers give Rrespect and her siblings five exercises that last from three to five seconds each. First, the handler gently tickles the puppy between the toes with a cotton swab. Next, the handler holds the puppy with both hands so its head is directly above its tail, then holds it firmly with both hands so its head is pointed toward the floor. The puppy is then resting in both hands with its muzzle facing the ceiling before the thermal stimulation when it is placed feet-first on a damp, cool towel.

The eight puppies live in the whelping barn until they reach 8 weeks and puppy consultants administer the puppy aptitude test. The military developed the test from similar civilian tests that evaluate dogs for social attraction; social and elevation dominance; retrieval; and sight, sound and touch sensitivity.

"It's a personality test in preparation to place these puppies with their foster homes," said Lynnette Butler, a puppy consultant with the breeding program. "The first thing we do at this stage is social attraction. We test whether the puppy is willing to

come to you or not. We generally like a puppy that's willing to come to you readily with its tail up."

Rrespect marches to puppy consultant David Concepcion-Garcia, who then places her on her back to see if she's willing to be under a handler's control. She fidgets a bit, not too comfortable with being held on her back. Next, Mr. Garcia backs away to see if she's willing to come to him again after he held her down to test her social dominance.

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— Tracy Shaw

When she does, Mr. Garcia picks up Rrespect and holds her for 30 seconds to test her elevation dominance.

He then tosses a wad of paper, followed by a tennis ball, to test her retrieving skills. The evaluations conclude with tests of the puppy's touch, sound and sight sensitivities, and her hunt drive. The consultant places about a dozen kibble in a cardboard box and watches how Rrespect uses her scent to find the treat.

At 12 weeks, foster consultants use information from the aptitude tests to place the puppies. Foster parents must live within two hours of Lackland because they must bring the puppies in for monthly medical evaluations and go on monthly hiking trips with other fosters in their dog's litter. Fosters also must have a fenced-in backyard and cannot have any children under the age of 4 or more than three personal dogs.

The program provides a carrier, food, toys, bowls, collars, leashes, veterinary care and guidance, which includes helping to set realistic expectations for the type of dog they will have in their homes.

"You're not getting a Lab," Mr. Garcia said. "The drive is 100 times greater. We like to set expectations and give our fosters every tool we can."

Months before Rrespect began her pre-training, she showed signs of her future in her foster parent's home. She was Mrs. Dietrich's third foster military working puppy. Mrs. Dietrich's second puppy, Oopey, is now in military working dog training. Still, when Rrespect first entered the house, Mrs. Dietrich was surprised by her intelligence, problem-solving skills and focus on a toy, a sign that breeding program consultants associate with her prey drive. All are characteristics of the Belgian Malinois breed, which make them perfect military working dogs, handlers say.

"The first time I put a toy on the floor, I was amazed at the energy she went at this toy with," Mrs. Dietrich said. "Twenty minutes later, she looked up at me. For 20 minutes, all she could think about was that toy. She parades around the house all the time with her toys. It's called practicing possession."

"I'm either laughing my head off or having a headache every minute with her. There is no in-between."

Names for military working puppies come from lists supplied by the DOD Military Working Dog Veterinary Service Hospital at Lackland, which generates a list from

photo by Lance Cheung



Sarah Dietrich, a professional dog trainer and volunteer foster provider in San Antonio, observes Rrespect's drive to keep all of her toys in close proximity.

photo by Lance Cheung

Energy, intelligence, agility and tenacity are all strong characteristics of the Belgian Malinois breed. This puppy from the "R" litter holds one ball in its mouth, while using its paws to stop a second ball from getting away.



photo by Lance Cheung



suggestions made by the general public at <http://dogvet.amedd.army.mil>. Names of fallen military working dog handlers or previous foster parents are given priority, however.

One dog in the "R" litter, Romano, was named after a former foster parent, Col. Joseph Romano. Colonel Romano and his wife Karen fostered a military working dog while he was commander of the 37th Training Group at Lackland. He now monitors security coordination and special programs for the Secretary of the Air Force at the Pentagon. Their dog, Vvipser, is now a working dog for the 802nd Security Forces Squadron and was a breeder for three litters in 2010. Colonel Romano said his wife treated Vvipser like a child.

SOMETIMES IT'S LIKE SENDING OFF A HYPER CHILD TO DAY CAMP. OTHER TIMES, IT'S REALLY HEARTBREAKING

— Sarah Dietrich

"His sense of smell was phenomenal," he said. "Couple this with his bite and quickness, it was clear Vvipser would be one hell of a military working dog, as long as Karen didn't turn him into a domesticated pet."

The puppy named after Colonel Romano is showing similar signs that he also will succeed as a working dog, said his foster, Kevin Cody. Mr. Cody works with the Transportation Security Administration at the San Antonio International Airport.

After having their dogs for six months, Mrs. Dietrich and her husband, Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Jason Dietrich, and the other foster parents said goodbye to Rrespect and the other puppies in December when the dogs returned to Lackland for adolescent training or pre-training, a sort of high school for the military working dog.

This is often a time of mixed emotions: pride of sending the dog to learn an important job mixed with the sadness of sending them away.

"Sometimes it's like sending off a hyper child to day camp," Mrs. Dietrich said. "Other times, it's really heartbreaking. But you know they're going to be doing what they love. You know they're going off to do something they're going to really enjoy. You want them to succeed, and you're excited to see what they're going to do with their lives. You're raising a little soldier, and it's your way to support the military."

"Look at that dog," she said as Rrespect sniffed in the grass. "That dog wants to be doing that. She doesn't want to be sleeping on the couch." 🐾

Respect at three
months old during a
foster parent training
day, where the
puppies are brought
together for tempera-
ment and physical
evaluations.

